Angry Democrats: Florida and Beyond
Why is the left so mad?

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Howard Dean tapped a vein of anger to vault to a primary-contest lead, and other candidates feel impelled to follow his example. Why is the Democratic core so upset? I suppose you have to start, letting fairness outweigh judgment, with why they say they're angry.

Mr. Dean joined Gov. Gray Davis the other day to change the subject, instructing California voters that their recall contest "is really not about Gray's record." Rather, it's evidence that the governor's critics "do not accept the legitimacy of our elections." Not only in California but across the nation, he continued, "the right wing of the Republican Party" has conspired "to remove democracy from America."

The usual litany of GOP depredations against democracy starts with the impeachment vote led by GOP House members, proceeds through the 2000 Florida vote recount, then goes on to the redistricting controversy in Texas and finally to the Davis recall. Interestingly, Mr. Dean dropped impeachment, apparently preferring the company of Gray Davis to that of Bill Clinton. Perhaps he recognizes that if President Clinton had in fact been removed he would have been succeeded by Al Gore, who then would likely have gone on to win the 2000 election to the great benefit of the Democratic Party.

Mr. Dean did round the "remove democracy" litany back up to its usual four counts by throwing in Colorado redistricting in addition to Texas. Gerrymandering of congressional districts is in fact about the ugliest wart on the American political system, but Democrats have been past champions. In Texas, court-mandated districts have basically perpetuated historic Democratic gerrymandering, so that in the last election they controlled the House delegation by 17-15 with only 44% of the statewide vote.

Democrats have famously been boycotting the legislature to keep Republicans from redrawing these districts, but a new special session starts today. The same basic issues arise in Colorado, where new GOP-drawn districts are now being challenged in court. But the issues aren't about overturning elections. To the contrary, they arise because of the 2002 elections, when Republicans won control of both legislative houses in both states.

Now, Howard Dean has seen elections overturned. In the 2000 elections in his home state, voters who pulled a Republican lever found their votes being counted for Democratic control of the U.S. Senate. Democrats did not consult the voters when they persuaded Republican Jim Jeffords to give them the crucial 51st vote in organizing the Senate.

Remember, too, that Democrats also bent the rules to keep their U.S. Senate seat in New Jersey, booting scandal-singed Robert Torricelli when he fell behind in the polls. Their funeral service/election rally for the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, however, did not succeed in holding his seat in Minnesota. And just recently, of course, they hounded Miguel Estrada out of a seat on the D.C. Court of Appeals, for the first time using the filibuster to stop an appellate court nominee who clearly would have been confirmed if the Senate had been allowed to vote.

Not much justification for anger so far. What about Florida?
What happened in Florida was that George Bush won every official recount, a result confirmed by the press-sponsored unofficial recounts. Also, Mr. Bush didn’t start the lawsuits; Al Gore fired the first writ.

In the same election, John Ashcroft declined to go to court after he lost his Senate seat because votes for the dead man listed on the ballot were counted for his widow instead. Even Richard Nixon persuaded reporter Earl Mazo to abandon the story that John F. Kennedy’s forces stole the 1960 election in Illinois and Texas.

By contrast Mr. Gore went to court, asking for additional recounts in specified Democratic counties where 2-1 votes of election boards could find new Gore votes in "dimpled chads." He ordered up a smear campaign against Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, and pursued his litigation until even the activist Florida Supreme Court split 4-3, with a blistering dissent from its chief judge.

The Supreme Court stepped in to stop the chaos, ruling by a 7-2 majority that what the Florida court had chartered was unconstitutional. Two of the seven had their own ideas about the proper rules, but the five-member majority closed recounts summarily and let Ms. Harris certify a 537-vote victory for George Bush.

The media recounts found that Mr. Bush won by 493 votes. Mr. Bush also won, this tally determined, under an honest recount of votes in the counties the Gore lawsuits had selected. It did construct a Gore victory scenario if you counted spoiled ballots. But if you entertain "what if" scenarios, you have to remember that many Republican voters were dissuaded from voting when the television networks called the election for Gore before the polls had closed in the western panhandle counties. While the Florida election was excruciatingly close, it is simply not true that the Supreme Court let Mr. Bush steal it.

Angry Democrats may have convinced themselves otherwise, but again, why? The Democratic anger must have deeper roots, fit for speculation in a future column. When Democrats assert that the Republicans will do anything to win, their complaint is relevant only in terms of what psychologists call "projection," finding your own faults in others.